

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, December 1, 2019**

WHAT JESUS WANTS FOR CHRISTMAS

Revelation 2:1-7

Last Sunday I mentioned the letter from Jesus to the Church in Ephesus in Revelation 2:1-7 and suggested that we could spend an entire sermon on it. Which is what I propose to do today. So I invite you to turn in your Bible to Revelation.

To see the context, Revelation 2 and 3 contain seven brief letters – seven messages – from the risen Lord Jesus to seven churches in the Roman province of Asia (modern-day Turkey). These messages were given to the apostle John, who was in exile on Patmos, an island in the Aegean Sea, because of his faith in Christ. The seven churches are described as “golden lampstands” (1:20; 2:1). This imagery shows the value of the church in God’s eyes, since there is no more precious metal than gold. As a lampstand, the church is not itself the source of light. Jesus is the light. He is the light of the world (John 8:12). The church is the light-bearer. Our job, individually and together, is to shine the light of Jesus – the light of the gospel in all its grace and truth and beauty – into the dark places of sin and error and unbelief, so that everyone may know Him in the power of His saving love. Our job – the church’s job – is to be, as Jesus said, “a city on a hill” and to let the light of Jesus shine in and through us, so that others may see our good deeds and give praise to our Father in heaven (Matthew 5:14, 16).

The “seven stars” in 1:20 and 2:1 are identified as “the angels (or messengers) of the seven churches” (1:20). Biblical scholars are divided as to whether these seven stars refer to spiritual guardian angels for each church or to local church leaders or to something else. Like other details in the Book of Revelation, there remains a bit of mystery about it.

Nevertheless, there is no mystery about the fact that this is a message from Jesus, not only to the 1st-century church in Ephesus, but to His church in the world today. So, let’s give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God’s inspired, infallible, unerring, authoritative, and timeless Word.

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In a lot of ways, the church in Ephesus was a good church. You can see that from all the good things Jesus says about it. He is not paltry in His praise or chintzy in His commendation of the church. He sees the good things the church is doing and He affirms them for it all. The three main things for which Jesus commends them are:

1. Their hard work and diligence in doing good deeds;
2. Their perseverance as followers of Christ in the face of sometimes fierce opposition from the culture in which they lived; and
3. Their theology, which was orthodox to the core.

They were actively engaged in ministry. They put hands and feet to their faith. They endured hardships without throwing their Christianity overboard. And their theology was unimpeachable. They zealously held fast to the essentials of the faith. They refused to tolerate false doctrines. They “test(ed) the spirits to see whether they are from God” (1 John 4:1). They also refused to tolerate sinful attitudes and actions in the church. They were on their guard against the infiltration of ungodly lifestyles as well as false teachings. They were obviously serious about their faith as followers of Jesus.

Jesus, who knows the church (and each one of us) intimately, found much in the church at Ephesus to praise. But He found one thing lacking, and He put His finger on it in verse 4. Do you remember Astronaut Jim Lovell’s famous words in *Apollo 13*? “Houston, we have a problem.” Here Jesus says: “Ephesus, you have a problem.” “Church, you have a problem.”

The problem, says Jesus, is that “you have forsaken” (or ‘let go of’) “your first love” (NIV), or, as it says in the ESV, “the love you had at first” (2:4). What does Jesus mean here? What is the love He is referring to? Biblical scholars are divided on it. As I said last Sunday, it could be that Jesus is referring to their love for Him, their love for God. He could be saying that their love for Him is not as fervent as it once was, that it has grown cold, that their desire for God has been replaced by a sense of religious duty, that their relationship with God has been reduced to habits or rituals they carry out because they are supposed to. He could be saying that the Ephesians are not as close to Him as they once were, that the fire of their love for God is no longer what it used to be.

To hate error and evil, and to oppose them uncompromisingly, are good things. They are essential, in fact. They are integral to the church’s mission in the world. But they are not the same as loving Jesus. They are not the same as being in a love-relationship with God. The first and greatest commandment, Jesus says, is to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength” (Mark 12:30). The first mark of a true and living church, as John Stott says, is love. “It is not a living church at all unless it is a loving church” (Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church*, 28). This love must first and foremost be for God, who loved (and loves) us so much that He gave His only Son to die for us (John 3:16).

But it may be that Jesus is speaking to the Ephesians about their love for one another in the church. It may be that they have taken their relationships with one another for granted. Perhaps in the busyness of ministry or life in general, they have neglected to nurture personal relationships. Perhaps relationships that once were close and fresh and vibrant have become more distant and stale.

It could be their love for God. It could be their love for one another in the church. It could be both. What Jesus says to the church in Ephesus could be true of any church. Including ours. And it could be true in the life of any Christian.

There were lots of good things going on in the church at Ephesus, but the bottom line is that good works, good theology, and a refusal to give up in spite of opposition are no substitute for love – love for God and love for one another. As Alan Johnson says: “Loving devotion to Christ can be lost in the midst of active service, and certainly no amount of orthodoxy can

make up for a failure to love one another” (Johnson, *Revelation [The Expositor’s Bible Commentary]*, Vol. 12; Hebrews – Revelation], 434).

Let me encourage you, in the name of Jesus, to examine yourself in the mirror of God’s Word. Is your love for God as strong as it once was? Do you feel the same closeness to God that you once felt? Do you have the same desire to know God and to grow in your relationship to Him that you once had? Have you lost some of your fervor for God? For His Word? For prayer?

And what about your relationships in the body of Christ, in the fellowship of the Faith Church family? Have you drifted away from the closeness you once felt with your sisters and brothers in Christ? Do you feel more distant from other members of the church family, whether due to busyness or disagreement or something else?

Paul’s words to the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 13:5 seem timely: “Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves” (NIV). “Give yourselves regular checkups. You need firsthand evidence ... that Jesus Christ is in you. Test it out. If you fail the test, do something about it” (MSG). Paul is not saying that you (or I) should be obsessive or compulsive about examining ourselves. But we should be serious about it. We should be intentional about it. We should make every effort to strengthen and deepen our love for God and our love for one another. If we fail the test, we’re in trouble. And we need to do something about it.

Here is what Jesus tells the church at Ephesus to do about it. He prescribes three action steps. He tells them to *remember*, *repent*, and *resume*.

First, they are to “remember the height from which (they) have fallen” (2:5). It is a mistake to think that you can live in the past. It is a mistake to want to live in the past, because the past is history; it is over; though there are things from the past we may very much want to bring into the present and carry into the future. Longing nostalgically for the past is not particularly helpful. But to remember the past and to compare what we are with what we were at one time may be of great value.

It is always a good thing to remember what we were like before we were apprehended by the grace of God, before we came to know Jesus Christ as the true Son of God, Savior of sinners, and Lord of our lives. It is always good – essential – to remember our spiritual lostness apart from Christ, our inability to make ourselves right with God or even to do anything to contribute to our salvation. It is always good – essential – to remember what Jesus did for us on the cross. It is always good to remember the exhilaration we felt when we first knew the wonder of being forgiven by God. It is always good and right to remember the gospel and the difference it has made in our lives. It is always good and right to remember those times when we felt closest to God. And when we felt closest to one another. It is good and right to remember all these things, and to think about what may have changed.

Second, Jesus tells the Ephesians to repent (2:5). To repent is to turn around. It involves a change of mind (and heart) that leads to a change in direction. Our church address is 5725

Castlewellan Drive. For everyone who lives on any of the streets off Castlewellan – Kelsey Point, Castlefin, Dunstable, Dunman, Jowett, Ballycastle, or Warren Point – the only road in or out is Castlewellan. The only way to get out of the neighborhood by car or truck is to turn around and take Castlewellan back to Van Dorn Street. This act of turning around is a metaphor for repentance. You have to turn around and change direction.

To repent is to turn away from any way of thinking that takes Jesus and His grace for granted. Or that causes you to think you don't need God. It is to turn away from things that get in the way of your love for God, to turn away from things that dull your appetite for the Bible, or that steal the time you have for prayer. It is to turn away from those things that dishonor God and damage or hinder your relationships with others in the body of Christ. I could make a list of both actions and attitudes that do these things. But I think with the help of the Holy Spirit you can come up with a list in your own life.

Repentance involves coming to our senses, like the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32), admitting what we have done that we should not have done, and what we have not done that we should have done, and owning responsibility for what we did or failed to do. Susan Wise Bauer makes this distinction between an apology and a confession: “An *apology*,” she says, “is an expression of regret: I am sorry. A *confession* is an admission of fault: I am sorry because I did wrong. I sinned” (Bauer, *The Art of the Public Grovel*; quoted in Paul Wilkes, *The Art of Confession*, 4-5). A sincere apology may include an admission of fault or responsibility. True repentance always includes such an admission.

If you are struggling in a relationship – it could be your relationship with God, your relationship with your spouse or a family member, a neighbor, a friend, someone you work with, or someone at church – think about the part of the situation or conflict or problem that you're responsible for, and take responsibility for it. If you think about the problem situation as a pie, what is your slice of the pie? How big a slice of the pie are you responsible for? Are you taking responsibility for your slice of the pie? Or are you playing the blame game in order to avoid dealing with your contribution to the conflict? As long as you can blame someone else, you won't have to repent or change.

But that is *not* what Jesus wants. It is not what He wants from any of us. Or *for* any of us. From the very beginning of His ministry, His message has always included the call to repent. When He began proclaiming the good news of the gospel, He said: “Repent, for the kingdom of God is near” (Matthew 4:17; Mark 1:15).

If you have drifted away from God, now is the time to repent and return to Him. If you have allowed your love for God to grow cold – or even lukewarm – now is the time to repent and rekindle the love you had at first. If you have distanced yourself from others or have allowed a critical spirit to make a home in your heart, now is the time to repent and renew your resolve, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to cultivate a loving spirit and loving relationships in the family of believers.

Remember, says Jesus. *Repent*. Third, Jesus tells the Ephesians to *resume* – to *do* the things you did when your love was fresh and strong. His message is the same for any church,

regardless of all the good things it has going for it, that it has let go of – or is in danger of letting go of – its first love: A love for God that supersedes all other loves; love for the gospel message and its power to save sinners; and love for our sisters and brothers in the fellowship of Christ's church, including those who don't always see things the way we do.

This message is for the church as a whole, but not just for the church. It is also for each of us personally. Individually. So do not miss the opportunity to let the Lord Jesus speak to you through this letter to the church in Ephesus.

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I know a family that does its Christmas gift exchange with the help of a website called *Eflster*. Names are chosen secretly, so you don't know who has your name. But each person in the exchange can put wish list items on the website, so the person giving to you can have some idea of what you would like. If Jesus were to put His wish list on *Eflster*, what do you think it would have on it? I think this letter to the church in Ephesus gives us an idea.

What does Jesus want for Christmas? The renewing of the love we had at first for Him and for each other. The renewing of your love and mine. How do we renew our love for Him and for each other?

1. By remembering;
2. By repenting; and
3. By resuming the things we did at first.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.